

Benefits of going gas

Fireplace switch averts burn restrictions; agency offers rebates

By Alex Breitler

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Bob and Mary Lou Schaeneman grew weary of lugging firewood into the house.

So they upgraded from an open-hearth fireplace to a pellet stove - only to discover that air quality restrictions would often forbid them from using it.

So the Schaenemans went one step further: Earlier this month, they took advantage of a rebate program to help pay for a new gas insert where their fireplace used to be.

How it works

- First, take a photo of your old fireplace or wood/pellet stove and submit it to the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District, along with a completed application. The form and other details about the program are available at valleyair.org/grants/burncleaner.htm. Or call (209) 557-6400.
- Once you receive a voucher from the district, take it to a participating business — a list is posted on the website — and schedule an installation.
- When the work is done, file a claim for payment along with a photo of the new device.
- Devices must be designed to provide heat, not simply ambience. Only residents of San Joaquin County and other Valley counties are eligible.

Finally, they can burn again and heat the Victorian home that has been in Bob Schaeneman's family for almost six decades.

"The no-burn days were what really drove us over the top," Mary Lou Schaeneman said. "It was an expense, but it was worth it."

Burning any solid fuel has been illegal in San Joaquin County for 27 of the past 31 days, an extraordinary streak caused by the historically dry weather, which has cursed the Valley with stagnant, polluted air.

For residents such as the Schaenemans, the rebate program appears more attractive than ever.

The San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District offers rebates of \$500 to upgrade to a gas insert, stove or fireplace. Such improvements typically cost thousands of dollars, so you'll still shoulder most of the cost. But the rebate could make an upgrade somewhat more affordable.

Low-income residents, in fact, are eligible for a larger rebate - \$1,500.

The money comes from fees paid by polluting Valley businesses. More than \$2.1 million in rebates have been awarded up and down the Valley since 2009, allowing for the installation of 3,750 new heating units - the vast majority of them gas.

Switching to cleaner wood stoves or pellet stoves is also an option, yielding rebates of \$100 or \$250, respectively. However, those devices cannot be used on no-burn days.

Air quality officials later this year may consider changing that policy, district spokesman Anthony Presto said.

In the meantime, any kind of upgrade would be an improvement over open fireplaces or older-style polluting wood stoves, he said.

"If we had more of these clean devices out there being used, that means a lot less particulate matter in the air and the possibility of more days that you can burn," Presto said. "It should translate into cleaner air for everyone."

John Dykman, owner of Lodi-based Master Sweep-N-Clean, completed the gas insert at the Schaeneman home. He said there has been more interest in fireplace upgrades as no-burn days have become more frequent - not just this year, but over the past several years.

"This is the most no-burn days we've had in forever," Dykman said. "It's well worth the paperwork" to apply for a rebate and upgrade.

At J&D Spas & Stoves in Stockton, upgrading to gas starts at \$2,800. "Five hundred dollars off is a nice chunk," owner Denise Wittlinger said. "Gas is easier on breathing, and it's less expensive than electricity."

And then there's the advantage of not carrying piles of wood around.

At a home in Brookside on Thursday, Wittlinger's husband, John, installed a gas insert that turns on with the click of a remote control. It was a relatively simple installation: Wittlinger ran new ventilation ducts through the chimney, slid the insert into place, connected it to an existing gas line and put in a facade to make the whole thing look pretty.

He said he's been especially busy lately. "It's been great," Wittlinger said. "For one, it's been cold. But also, all of December was a no-burn day, basically."

The gas insert should be more effective at warming this house, he said.

Indeed, the Environmental Protection Agency says most of the heat from a fire in a traditional fireplace is simply lost up the chimney.

Wood smoke is a leading cause of wintertime particle pollution in the Valley, a serious health risk linked to respiratory illness and premature death for those with chronic heart and lung disease.